

MAD TRICKS IN MODERN DRAMA

The interplay of dramatic techniques and perplexing themes in O'Neill and Pirandello

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ABSTRACT

This study assesses the degree of harmony within the interaction between thematic configuration and dramatic effect in two pioneering and exponent works of Modern Drama: *The Emperor Jones* (1920), by Eugene O'Neill, and *Henry IV* (1922), by Luigi Pirandello.

KEY WORDS

expressionism, existentialism, identity, colonialism

JONES Is you civilized, or
is you dese ign'rent black niggers heah?
Sho'! Dat was all in yo' own head.
Wasn't nothin' dere.

It has to be as if it were true.
HENRY IV Exactly, as if true!
Because, only so, truth is not a jest.

In response to the war-awareness and the questioning of traditional values — intellectual standings arisen from the rubble and bloodshed of World War I — two artists, each in turn fighting his own private throes, provided American and European audiences (and later, much of the world) with two of the most fascinating theatrical plays of the twentieth century. Eugene O'Neill, while struggling to save his mother from the pangs of heroin addiction, and Luigi Pirandello, while nursing himself his wife's mental collapse, contrived *The Emperor Jones* in 1920 and *Henry IV* in 1922.

Much to the dazzle and bewilderment of the general public the history of the theater was at crossroads: two journeys into the territory of the mind and two precursors of Modern Drama; an elaborately symbolic dramatization of a psychological experience, marking the onset of American Expressionism; and a disconcerting, down-to-the quick texture of philosophical inquiry, inaugurating the stage Existentialism in continental Europe.

Henry IV is undoubtedly an unforgettable character to most viewers. His clownish image is able to suggest the mosaic of his personality, the intensity of his suffering, and the external transfiguration of his internal conflict. The details of his outfit are also meant to link, sometimes to obliterate, yet always to testify to the various levels of human (un)perception and (mis)understanding.

How much can we trust in what we see, or rely on what we seem to understand? Henry IV asks Donna Matilda: "Has it never happened to you, my lady, to find a different self in yourself? Have you always been the same?... One day... how was it, how was it you were able to commit this or that action?"¹ His observation encompasses two levels of reality. At the immediate one, his speech concerns a philosophical interrogation; at a deeper layer, which Donna Matilda later seems to have perceived, or at least, suspected, the Majesty is subtly stinging her back on account of her disregard and painful taunt toward him.

The interplay between such realms of reference, and other crossed levels of reality, nearly always underlines the Emperor's ironic, sarcastic, poignant, disconcerting discourse. One of the most cunning remarks from the Majesty concerns the relativity of the self. It emerges when he has just told his counselors about his seriousness toward the masquerade he has deliberately imposed on himself:

I would never wish you to think as I have done on this horrible thing which really drives one mad, that if you were beside another and looking into his eyes — as I one day looked into somebody's eyes — you might as well be a beggar before a door never to be opened to you; for who does enter there will never be you, but someone unknown to you with his own different impenetrable world.²

As opposed to the baffling world of philosophical probing, Jones interacts within the obscure domain of psychology and politics. On a Caribbean island, "as yet not self-determined by White Marines," lives a man soon to learn about how his self-evasive, seemingly almighty ego, is built up on temporary social assurance rather than on self-reliance.³ Resorting to the representation of the protagonist's rationality, O'Neill chooses to scan and give full pictorial dramatization of the anarchy within Jones' mind. Yet, Jones' psychological manifestations are neither limited to the proportions of an individual's experience, nor are they squeezed to present-time-bound references. The horrors of pre-Civil War slavery in the U.S., for instance, are mingled with his own terrors and the islanders' mystique.

Crooked, narcissist, Jones watches his social mask burst into fragments. But has Brutus Jones, after all, gone mad? Well, the fine line between mental illness and mental sanity is also at stake in *Henry IV*, drama in which prevails the intellectual rather than the pictorial approach to a widespread human vice: fencing up the largest social institution, the big house of the sane.

Pirandello concocted brilliant personages to his favorite piece of drama. Among others, Donna Matilda shows up as accordingly vain and good-looking at the age of forty-five (under tons of make-up, just to make sure). All and all, it was her looks that once attracted Henry IV to becoming Henry IV as well as opening his heart for her and her mockery.

The doctor, in elegant manners, speaks the voice of science. He triggers our laughter by reminding us of how much we usually expect from professionals like him, and yet so little do we get. Very little indeed does he know about the driving forces operating inside

¹ BLOCK. *Masters of Modern Drama*, p.519.

² IBIDEM. p.527.

³ IBIDEM. p.575.

the mentally ill. A typical case of parody occurs when the Doctor assesses the Emperor's state of mind:

I don't work miracles, because I'm a doctor and not a miracle-worker. I listened very intently to everything he said; and I repeat that a certain analogical elasticity, common in all systematized delirium, is evidently with him much — what shall I say — much relaxed! The elements, that is, of his delirium no longer hold together. It seems to me he has lost the equilibrium of his second personality and sudden recollections drag him — and this is very comforting — not from a state of incipient apathy, but rather from a morbid inclination to reflective melancholy, which shows a... very considerable cerebral activity. Very comforting, I repeat!⁴

The essence of this and other remarks from the Doctor, we gather, relates us to the power held by medical professionals to judge who is and who is not sane. The unsuitability of the objective, scientific approach to human health issues is thus represented.

Berthold, the new counselor, provides further reason for skepticism. He is a character leading the audience towards the intricacies of the two major worlds in the play: those of the eleventh and twentieth centuries. His surprise at the opening of the play is also ours. The clash in communication is a symbolic momentum for the question of multiple or wavering sense of identity. Berthold is going to start his new job and says,

(*Taking his head in his hand*) But I don't know a word of what you're talking about.
 ORDULPH So much the worse for you, my boy!
 HAROLD But the trouble is that not even we know who you are.
 BERTHOLD What? Not even you? You don't know who I'm supposed to be?⁵

In fact, humor abounds in *Henry IV*. Here is Berthold's fear contrasting Lundolph's ironic point:

BERTHOLD I say, look here... I've no particular desire to go mad here.
 HAROLD Go mad, be hanged! You have a fine time!
 BERTHOLD Tell me this: how have you managed to become so learned?
 LANDOLPH My dear fellow, you can't go back over eight hundred years of history without picking up a bit of experience.⁶

Undoubtedly, the outcome of the Emperor's characterization is immediate sympathy and fascination. Now a clown with his bitter-sweet aura masked by joyous colors and motifs, in the past he was in fact a jolly good actor. His overall look is pale. He wears a penitent sack. On this detail we see the shadow of the two overlaying tragic stories. The historical German Emperor who humbly spent two nights in the snow for the sake of showing his penitence to the Pope is revived by the man whose jovial mannerism and romantic revelations were object to mockery, which in turn led him to tragedy. This man mourns in fixed, dreadful eyes, in nervousness and rage. His gray hair is boyishly tinted blond, which evokes the theme of our denied yet fickle self-image. Henry IV once says, not one of us "can lie or pretend. We're all fixed in good humor in a certain concept of ourselves."⁷ What this attitude entails is in part that which befalls us in times of depression — when the illusion, a vital energy, is gone.

⁴ BLOCK. *Masters of Modern Drama*, p.522.

⁵ IBIDEM. p.511.

⁶ IBIDEM. p.512.

⁷ IBIDEM. p.519.

The Emperor is indeed the only character who is aware of the magic play on words to which the other personages seem to struggle to relate. Along his flamboyant flux of senses of reality and personal identity, the audience is likely to be stunned by the quick change in tone on his speech. In Act Two Henry IV leaves behind those who have come to see him in dismay:

Don't you think it is rather hard for a man to keep quiet, when he knows that there is a fellow going about trying to persuade everybody that he is as he sees him, trying to fix him in other people's opinion as a "madman" — according to him?⁸

The lecturing mode of expression preponderates in the Majesty's discourses, but sarcasm is characterized in several passages, like at the end of Act One, when indicating Belcredi he speaks very softly to Landolph, Harold, and Ordulph, "I don't know why I cannot be humble before that man there!"⁹ Two planes of reference are juxtaposed: on the immediate level the ironic blow strikes the Church through the personification of the Monsignor; the undertone reaches the back of Belcredi who is intrinsically related to the carnival accident.

Besides the varied contrasting costumes from the eleventh and the twentieth centuries, Pirandello's play also bestows other visual enchantments, such as the throne room, where antique decorations embellish the major setting, and obviously, the two life-size portraits hang. Those pictures are key elements to the economy of the play as links between the present and the past. They also play a very meaningful role in the plot: they work as time tunnels, or cosmic mirrors, in front of which Matilda, Belcredi, and Henry IV have the chance to connect the present with the tragic events of the past. Most importantly, though, is the fact that the portraits are part of the Doctor's plan to "heal" the Emperor, who also uses it to illustrate his points on the theme of human vanity and passing time.

Henry IV had been — twenty years before — the object of a silly joke. He had indeed been mocked for his eccentricity, exaltation, and general playful ways — and it "made him suffer," says Donna Matilda.¹⁰ Now the scheme to save him from insanity makes him extremely angry. The visitors and the velvets have been told — but is the ferocious man really one of us again? While we wonder, we reflect on Tennessee Williams notes to *The Glass Menagerie*: "truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through changing it into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance".¹¹

It is in fact in *The Emperor Jones* where the poetic vessel runs in full swing. The symbolic use of colors is a major stage element in O'Neill's early drama. In the opening scene the prevailing pattern is red and white. Scarlet are the throne, the matting, the Emperor's bell, and the Black woman's handkerchief. Smithers' nose and eyes are red, but most strikingly, the palace is said to be like a bleeding tomb. The walls of the palace, however, are white-washed. The titles and pillars are also white. So is Smithers' suit and cork helmet. If we refer this scheme to the white race supremacy in the western world

⁸ BLOCK. *Masters of Modern Drama*, p.526.

⁹ IBIDEM. p.520.

¹⁰ IBIDEM. p.516.

¹¹ IBIDEM. p.991.

and the suffering and death bequeathed us through colonialism and slavery and general practices of prejudice, we may be reasonably sure about the validity of the applied symbolism.

The blackness of the forest certainly exerts great impact on stage. Darkness — the world of dreams, magic, the unknown, and the frightening feelings of constriction — predominates in all scene but the first and the last. The overall result is a visual countenance of Jones' obscure mind in reverie, terror, and despair. This gloominess on Jones' trajectory toward death is contrasted by various sources of lighting: the glittering eyes of the Formless Little Fears, or the flicking light of the match, in Scene Two; the barely perceptible, suffused, eerie glow of the moon in Scene Three; and the moonlit road which "glimmers ghastly and unreal" in Scene Four.¹² At this point the narrative voice in the stage directions reaches one of its moments of grandeur: "It is as if the forest had stood aside momentarily to let the road pass through and accomplish its veiled purpose."¹³

It is also relevant to stress the exquisite organic quality which the forest is capable of rendering to the settings. If, in static position in Scene Two, the edge of the forest denotes the dividing line between consciousness and hallucination, the walls of the forest close in and set the ending of Scenes Four and Five in contagious awe. In Scene Six, ropes and creepers give an arched appearance of a vessel, a fabulous hint of originality in theatrics.

Another innovative technique in modern drama is the expressionistic use of cyclical, rhythmic, silent, yet highly suggestive bodily movement. O'Neill has made up several scenes in which such deeds are done mechanically as if the characters were marionettish figures. That is the case in Scene Four, when two codes of reality are overlapped. Jones attempts to murder the Prison Guard with his shovel. Yet, he fails, for he actually doesn't have a shovel, like the other Convicts. In the past he has indeed hit the man, but now there are layers and layers between his means and his desires. The action now is within his mind — where life leads on its way somewhat independently from our choice.

The Black Emperor's bodily expressions throughout the play are indexical of his mental transitions. They illustrate, for instance, his inner sense of humiliation — his implacable descent toward the level of savagery. In Scene Two, Jones is down on his hands and knees, crawling after food like an animal. Toward the end of his nightmarish wandering, the Emperor appears to be closer to insanity than ever. He has acquired a fixed, stony expression in his eyes. The stage directions suggest he has strange deliberation, like a sleep-walker, or one in a trance. He next cowers close to the ground, hides his face in his shoulders, and remains half knelt, paralyzed, in awe at the Witch Doctor. The silver bullet, his last shot, saves him from the shattering spell, though.

This special bullet is both the major trick Jones uses to manipulate the good faith of the islanders, and the element of discovery which allows the natives to get rid of the impostor. Curiously enough, the one bullet which kills the Emperor was made of money, or maybe the silver dollar from the United States, we suspect, in lieu of other national allusions in the text.

¹² BLOCK. *Masters of Modern Drama*, p.582.

¹³ *IBIDEM*. p.582.

The dialectal language spoken by the Majesty is thoroughly marked by a high level of contradiction and ironic humor. Jones, for example, boasts about his disbelief in superstition, or witchcraft, yet he will not leave the palace through a door other than that through which he had entered. He also carries a rabbit's foot. In the midst of an unrestrained ego trip and self-deceit, he claims in Scene One, "Listen to det roll call, will you? Must be mighty big drum carry dat far. (*Then with laugh*) Well, if they ain't no whole brass to see me off, I sho' got de drum part of it."¹⁴

What the Emperor Jones is not and will never be aware of is that his own pulse is being echoed by that tom-tom throbbing — and that no evasive role playing on his part will deny its mortal pace. Among other results, the ascending drumbeat allows the audience to share the downfall of the villain very intensely and uninterruptedly. It also points at the multiple levels of representation of what is done on stage. In addition, other sounds help establish the complex sensorial texture of *The Emperor Jones*. A gallery of wailing and howling and shouting makes it possible to experience communally the history of the oppressed, the deceived, and the suffering.

Focusing attention again on the story-line and the staged effects of *Henry IV* and *The Emperor Jones*, we are mostly convinced of the genuine talent behind their balmy collage of scenes: it fosters exuberant plasticity and adroit staging of meaning. On the one hand, Pirandello's nameless Emperor's entropic process of self-identification uncurls through the suppression of his real sense of illusion about his self and about the external world. His wondering across the blurring boundaries of pretense and reality, sanity and madness, are thus marvelously dramatized by the use of dexterous characterization, overleaping and overlapping codes of verbal communication, sharp images of irony and the humorous side to chaos. Most of all, his wondering is made more incisive by appealing to the audience's stubborn need for separation between the real and the unreal, as well as for the eradication of all ambiguities and eccentricities.

On the other hand, the black Emperor, a symbolic individual who stands for a class, a nation, a gender, and a race, carries out an assault on racism, imperialism, mercenary enterprises, manipulation of opinion, and coercive or criminal methods of government. In order to accommodate such a variety of motifs, O'Neill decides to place the action and the props within the realm of Expressionism. The effect accomplished by visual configurations and audio schemes, apart from verbal and bodily languages, is stupendous.

The two Majesties, who see themselves in need for refuge (one from the existential anguish of not belonging, the other from the terrors of being near to death), seek asylum in madness and there undergo an overwhelming sense of constriction and identity dismantling. It is ultimately curious to realize that Brutus Jones' journey into the depths of insanity works just perfectly as to corroborate the fundamental insight which the nameless emperor bestows on the deceitful dichotomies of sanity and insanity, appearance and reality. It is now clear to us that either by shedding light on the great mysteries of the human condition, or else by dramatizing a pictorial side to human despair from within the territory of the mind, *Henry IV* and *The Emperor Jones* are paramount examples of highly consonant interaction between theatrical motifs and stage techniques.



¹⁴ BLOCK. *Masters of Modern Drama*, p.580.

RESUMO

Este estudo avalia o grau de harmonia na interação entre configuração temática e efeito dramático em duas obras pioneiras e expoentes do drama moderno: *The Emperor Jones* (1920), de Eugene O'Neill, e *Henry IV* (1922), de Luigi Pirandello.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

expressionismo, existencialismo, identidade, colonialismo

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